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WHATEVER IT IS, WE'RE AGAINST IT
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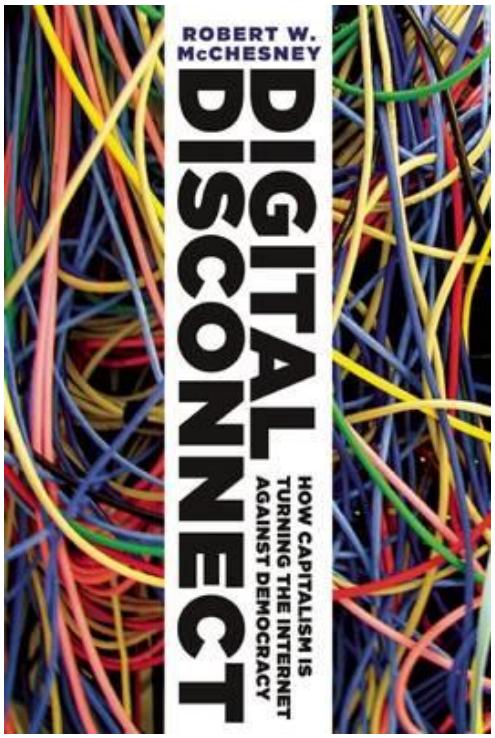
"Debate is Idiot Distraction" : Accelerationism and the Politics of the Internet

By Eugene Brennan.



Robert McChesney, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy (http://thenewpress.com/index.php?option=com_title&task=view_title&metaproductid=1878)*, The New Press, 2013

The myths of libertarian competition and innovation espoused by defenders of neo-liberalism are the same myths which 'celebrants' of the internet have fallen prey to. In the nineties these 'celebrants' outweighed those Robert McChesney refers to as 'skeptics'. Theoretical and journalistic writing, intoxicated by the advances of the net, was by no means limited to the starry-eyed optimism of the likes of *Wired* magazine in California. The Internet and new technological changes were also a source of fascination from the very different perspective of the nihilistic libidinal economy of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) at Warwick University. Sickened by the moralising tendencies of a Left content with identity politics, their controversial leader Nick Land searched for a theoretical praxis based on a negation of identity, a post-human 'machinic praxis'. This led him to embrace the de-subjectiying qualities of neo-liberalism, envisioning capitalist speed as a generator of post-human technological revolution. The CCRU's fusion of disparate elements included texts by Deleuze and Guattari , cyberpunk and science fiction references, films such as Blade Runner and Apocalypse Now, and jungle and rave music. The texts are saturated with a discourse on immersion and imminence, always oriented towards an experience of the Outside and a celebration of post-human possibilities. If for Land and the CCRU, imminent human extinction was accessible on the dance floor, network theory and the development of the internet also pointed to exhilarating trajectories towards the Outside.

Fast-forward to web 2.0 and the landscape of the internet is not one of an exciting labyrinth of networks but is characterised by the exact opposite of what attracted the CCRU: the constant maintenance of personal identity through social media, monopolization of the internet by corporate interests and government surveillance. The net's development can be illustratively read in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's characterisation of capitalism as deterritorializing on the one hand what it reterritorilizes with the other. (The most illuminating example of these contradictions at work might be Thatcherism: There is a 'nothing is sacred' advocacy of the marketization of

public services while at the same time espousing sentimental nationalism and traditional family values.) Anarchy and patriarchy apparently go hand in hand.

The development of the internet in tandem with neoliberalism has played out in terms of these ultimately stifling contradictions. Robert McChesney's *Digital Disconnect* makes for essential reading because it gives a well-researched account of the internet grounded in political economy, which undermines lazy narratives that oppose an innovative private economy and a stifling public (state) sphere. McChesney's narrative on the internet undermines any remaining conceptions of neo-liberalism as anti-state and pro-market. Rather, neo-liberalism is more akin to supervision of the state by the market (with a sometimes complex reversal of roles). Government and corporate interests have increasingly worked together for anti-democratic ends. One unsettling example is the introduction of the Cyber Intelligence Sharing and Protection Act (CISPA) in the U.S. House of Representatives in April 2012. Edward Snowden's recent revelations have halted the bill for the moment but it offers an interesting example of how Internet giants work with government. CISPA would allow companies and government to legally bypass privacy protections to search through personal e-mails, private correspondence and contacts, with only the vaguest justifications. The internet giants all support it according to McChesney because it would them legal cover for what they are already surreptitiously doing with the government. It also opens up potentially lucrative deals and possibility of more secure government protection.

Snowden's revelations have since issued a sharp wake-up call to anyone still labouring under the illusion that the net is an inherently democratic space:

> For a firm like Google, there is an immense amount of money to be made providing security tools to governments and corporations and not as much of a market for supporting dissidents, especially those who have the misfortune of living in countries with governments that have close relations with the U.S. government

When the NSA started an illegal warrantless wiretapping programme on US citizens in 2001 it received the unconditional support of all major telecom companies except Qwest, who were threatened with loss of lucrative government contracts if they did not comply with the Bush administration and the NSA. The monopoly domination and emerging cloud structure of the internet works in the governments favour in such cases as there are fewer companies to negotiate with. Another glimpse of the potential efficacy of this consolidation of monopolies came in the U.S. response to a wave of WikiLeaks revelations in 2010. Amazon removed WikiLeaks from its servers and the site instantly crashed as there was nowhere else to go. Apple pulled a WikiLeaks app from its store and Paypal, MasterCard, Visa and Bank of America all severed ties to WikiLeaks.

Throughout the book McChesney is attentive to the problematic views of both 'skeptics' and 'celebrants'. Debates on the development of the internet have been structured around these opposing positions. The misguided view of both positions is to suppose that there are qualitative judgements to be made about the internet as inherently positive or negative. McChesney makes the welcome argument that it is a space that does not have magically democratic powers of resistance to monopolies of power and capital. Against the sometimes luddite skeptics he argues that it is a field of contestation. There is nothing inevitable about its development, as its long anti-commercial origins attest. There are obviously many positive facets to the internet, and he stresses that it could be developed towards much more democratic ends:

> The Internet and the broader digital revolution are not inexorably determined by technology; they are shaped by how society elects to develop them.

The most interesting aspect of the book is its focus on the internet's impact on news media, an area which celebrants have been particularly emphatic about apparently innovative and more democratic changes taking place. The research suggests otherwise. Studies have shown that the proliferation of media in recent years has led to less and less original reporting.

McChesney points to a 2010 Pew Centre for the People and the Press study which examined how news stories were generated and received among the public, focusing on the Baltimore area. Eight out of ten stories regurgitated already published information while more than ninety-five per cent of original news stories were still generated by old media, particularly the Baltimore Sun. However the Sun's production of original news stories was down more than thirty per cent from ten years ago and seventy-three per cent from twenty years ago.

The decline of journalism was underway before the internet but it has nevertheless accelerated the crisis. No more than six companies control more than eighty per cent of the American news. Fewer journalists are attempting to cover more and more areas with the inevitable consequence that the vast majority of news stories originate from official sources and press releases rather than independent investigation. The feeling that we are increasingly inundated with 'news' disguises a decline in actual investigative journalism.

The pressure to keep journalistic content free online means increasingly commercialized sources of funding have to be found with the result that content is increasingly dictated by advertising. The senior editors of the Washington Post, for example, "have embraced the view that studying [Internet user] traffic patterns can be a useful way to determine where to focus the paper's resources". Their unambiguous aim is to "find the content that will appeal to desired consumers *and* to the advertisers who wish to reach affluent consumers. In this relationship, advertisers hold all the trump cards, and the news media have little leverage. In the emerging era of 'smart' advertising, this means shaping the content to meet the Internet profiles of desired users, even personalizing news stories alongside personalized ads."

When AOL purchased the *Huffington Post* in 2011 an internal memo from AOL CEO Tim Armstrong summed up the editorial/commercial logic: he ordered all editors to evaluate future stories on the basis of "traffic potential, revenue potential, edit quality and turnaround time. All stories, he said are

to be evaluated according to the 'profitability consideration'." Such downward economic pressure on journalists again leaves it increasingly likely for news stories to offer little more than rewrites of PR press releases.

The corporate corruption of mainstream media is well known and has led to enthusiastic embraces of alternatives such as Wikileaks. However, the relative weakness of WikiLeaks' impact on public opinion in proportion to the shocking details of the released documents is a striking and unsettling testament to right-wing hegemony in the media, and the power of institutional channels of popular communication in framing narratives and opinion. Following the release of secret documents to the public, Heather Booke described how "documents languished online and only came to the public's attention when they were written up by professional journalists. Raw material alone wasn't enough". McChesney then highlights the complete lack of independent journalism to respond to the U.S. government's successful PR and media blitz to discredit WikiLeaks:

> How revealing that a news media that almost never does investigative work on the national security state or its relations with large corporations does not come to the defense of those who have the courage to make such information public!

Citizen journalism, blogging and alternative media provide some necessary alternatives to vacuous mainstream reporting. Valorizing such media can, however, lead to a sense of insular segregation from the popular sphere: the already-converted preach to each other within micro-communities. It can be sometimes easy to forget the disparity of opinion between your twitter feed and the majority of the electorate. Amidst the celebratory rhetoric about its democratizing nature, we need to be reminded of the limitations and shortcomings of alternative media. McChesney's research on the limitations of apparently 'democratic' and participatory media finds a more militant reinforcement in the theoretical work of Jodi Dean. Her work on communicative capitalism (http://commonconf.files.wordpress.com/2010/09/proofs-of-tech-fetish.pdf) identifies a technological fethishism among many media theorists, bloggers,

leftists, and conscientious web participants, which covers over a lack on the part of the subject. The fetish appeases guilt and sustains a somewhat deluded faith that we are well-informed, politically engaged citizens.

The technological fetish condenses and simplifies political complexities such as organisation, struggle, sustaining strategic modes of resistance over a period of time, and representation, into one problem to be solved: information. The problem is simply that we need to be better informed. Persistently framing the debate in terms of information, as WikiLeaks-enthusiasts and advocates of participatory media regularly do, does not pay adequate attention to media hegemony and the way in which narratives are deeply embedded in the social psyche, despite an abundance of information that contradicts those narratives.

As Dean also emphasises, valorising micro-political activity and online debates through social media "displaces political energy from the hard work of organisation and struggle." We are persistently invited to 'join the debate', share an article, and express our opinion in a variety of ways. We *feel* like we are politically engaged when really, as Nick Land put it, "debate is idiot distraction". The persistent exhortations to indulge in debates where apparently YOUR opinion counts contributes to and fosters an (un)critically relativist culture. Everything, we are often led to believe, is subjective, and thus it becomes more and more difficult to assert authoritative criticism.

The technology fetish encourages immediacy over sustained reflection and engagement. Filesharing *is* political. A website *is* political. Everything *is* political.

Theoretically endowing banal quotidian action with a 'political' status was prominent in much neo-anarchist theory before web 2.0 but it has, again, been even more problematically exacerbated in online activity. The 'everything is political' mantra is a dangerous one because, while true in itself, its discursive use can encourage a paradoxical depoliticization and retreat from politics into individual ethics, which actually plays into the hands of power and capital.

An interesting example of this kind of techno-political optimism is McKenzie Wark's updating of the Situationist International in which he makes such claims as: "every kid with a BitTorrent client is an unconscious Situationist."

Again, this sense of immediacy and insistence that peer-to-peer file-sharing *is* political operates as an unthreatening form of micro-politics and horizontalism.

McChesney's book also hints at these misguided approaches to technology and politics in his criticism of the arrogance of hackers who, he says, often persist in the naÃ¯ve faith that the "the revolutionary nature of the technology could trump the monopolizing force of the market".

The valorization of such horizontal politics frequently encourages a complacency and sense of self-satisfaction with one's own apparent radicalism, which leaves little hope of ever having an impact on the public at large. Zones of spontaneous autonomy, whether on the street or online, pose little threat to prevailing ideology and often only come into popular consciousness in the form of a carnivalesque sideshow to actual political struggle. Faced with repeated insistences that 'everything is political', it begins to feel like nothing is political.

McChesney's research on the development of the internet and inadequacies of online journalism, Dean's theory of communicative capitalism, and the insufficient responses of advocates of neo-anarchist micro-politics on the left all attest to a persistent lowering of the horizon of ambition which neo-liberalism imposes on political and cultural activity. Don't worry if right-wing hegemony poisons public opinion and creates horrible social divisions: you can find a quick release for your rage on an obscure 'lefty' blog that a few of your mates might read. These impotent responses are symptomatic of the engulfing power of neoliberalism, not condemnations of individual actors. The fact that intellectually discredited neoliberalism continues in zombie-like form seems to have actually strengthened the stronghold of capitalist realism, as described by Mark Fisher, in leftist responses as well as the popular imagination.

The resurgence of accelerationist theory in recent years points towards strategies of engagement with technology, politics and media which audaciously attempt to seriously raise the horizon of ambition.

Accelerationism was coined as a term of critique by Benjamin Noys (http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/apocalypse-tendency-crisis) in his compelling theoretical work *The Persistence of the Negative*. Noys used the term to identify and critique a strange trend in the wake of May 68 among French thinkers, most notably Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard and Baudrillard. The common thread was a nihilist embrace of forces of disenchantment as the means for achieving a "strange kind of liberation through absolute immersion in the flows and fluxes of a libidinised capitalism". Leftist politics often entails slowing things down, putting on the emergency brake. On the contrary, this thought embraces speeding things up, embracing the flows of the market. Nick Land took up this trajectory with the CCRU in the nineties embracing a deterritorialization free of the caution which Deleuze and Guattari advised. Land attempted to uproot the association of the market with capitalism arguing that the latter is stagnating while the former can be used to deterritorialize and accelerate towards a post-human post-capitalist society.

Where Land's writing was an anti-political celebration of the irrelevance of human agency, the emergence of a left accelerationism in recent years offers a more enlightened politicized theory. Land's misconception of capital as a sole and primary accelerator of innovation is even more glaringly obvious in its divorce from reality today. As Alex Williams has written (http://www.e-flux.com/journal/escape-velocities/):

> Technological progress, rather than erasing the personal, has become almost entirely Oedipalized, ever more focused on supporting the liberal individual subject. The very agent which Land identified as the engine of untold innovation has run dry. This is alienation of an all-too familiar, ennui-inducing kind, rather than a coldly thrilling succession of future-shocks. All of this opens up a space for the political again: if we desire a radically innovative social formation, capital alone will not deliver.

The CCRU embraced technology and the internet for the potential of acceleration and immersive intensity. On the level of consumption however, our experience of technology is not especially immersive.

The relentless circulation of information, and mere accumulation of gadgetery and apps, among other less than exhilarating developments, has led to a dispersal of attention and something akin to a state of permanent distraction. Franco 'Bifo' Berardi has written (in *Precarious Rhapsody* and other works) on how time and stimuli are being accelerated while experience is being decelerated. The hyper-abundance of information available, the sense of permanent distraction and increasingly precarious nature of labour for a cognitive workforce means that anxiety prevails over intensity. Late Capitalism's hijacking of our time to feel or experience takes the ultimate form of disconnection, for Berardi, in online pornography. There is no time for the slow immersive intensity of erotic experiences, replaced instead by the quick-fix neuro-short-circuiting of pornography.

While Berardi has written on the decelerative nature of consumption and experience in online and everyday activity, Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds have written on deceleration in cultural production. As Fisher put it recently (http://www.e-flux.com/journal/%E2%80%9Ca-social-and-psychic-revolution-of-almost-inconceivable-magnitude%E2%80%9D-popular-culture%E2%80%99s-interrupted-accelerationist-dreams/), reinforcing Reynolds's argument in *Retromania*:

> We live in a moment of profound cultural deceleration. The first two decades of the current century have so far been marked by an extraordinary sense of inertia, repetition, and retrospection, uncannily in keeping with the prophetic analyses of postmodern culture that Fredric Jameson began to develop in the 1980s. Tune the radio to the station playing the most contemporary music, and you will not encounter anything that you couldn't have heard in the 1990s.

A sense of cultural deceleration has repeatedly manifest itself in nostalgia, whimsicality, and retreat and regression from politics. This has been equally characteristic of many cultural attitudes towards the internet. While the advance of the net has had its major disappointments, the logical conclusion should not be to disconnect. When middle-class bestselling writers like Jonathan Franzen (http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/mar/07/jonathan-franzen-calls-twitter-irresponsible) berate virtually everything about the internet and implores writers to 'disconnect' , it not only betrays a completely clueless understanding of the realities of cultural and cognitive production for the twenty first century anxiety-ridden precarious worker, it also feebly and misguidedly responds to technological advances with an injunction to disengage and switch off. Rhetoric which encourages us to 'disconnect' comes across as a literary equivalent of folk troubadours such as Bon Iver, who leave the frantic pace of gentrified city life to go and find themselves anew in a cabin in the woods, armed with nothing but an acoustic guitar and a broken heart. Responses to disappointments with contemporary culture and technology do not have to result in self-indulgent retreat. Accelerationist aesthetics refuses such vain quests for a 'lost identity' and searches instead to rediscover 'future-shock', to awaken us from a sense of ahistorical slumber in a perpetual now.

As a political proposition, accelerationism has not been entirely convincing, as strong critiques (http://www.academia.edu/2197499/Cybernetic_Phuturism_The_Politics_of_Accelerat by Benjamin Noys in particular attest. However it opens up a space of debate and a desire to engage with political thought on an ambitious macro-level, which I suggested has been lacking in much leftist writing on the internet. In relation to the media in particular, it offers challenging provocations. It critiques neo-anarchist thought and activism for too often abandoning the struggle for hegemony and for not giving sufficient consideration of how to effectively communicate radical ideas on a genuinely popular level. While not giving up on the democratising potential of new media, the Accelerationist Manifesto (http://syntheticedifice.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/accelerate.pdf) rightly

insists that traditional media are still crucial in the framing of popular narratives and thus these institutions need to be fought for and brought as close as possible to popular control through wide-scale media reform.

The manifesto offers a provocative challenge to micro-politics. The rhetoric has a somewhat unsavoury macho tone which warrants critical rebukes. However its particular raising of political thought to a macro- level of complexity that simultaneously engages with the popular is enticing:

"We believe the most important division in today's left is between those that hold to a folk politics of localism, direct action, and relentless horizontalism, and those that outline what must become called an accelerationist politics at ease with a modernity of abstraction, complexity, globality, and technology. The former remains content with establishing small and temporary spaces of non-capitalist social relations, eschewing the real problems entailed in facing foes which are intrinsically non-local, abstract, and rooted deep in our everyday infrastructure. The failure of such politics has been built-in from the very beginning. By contrast, an accelerationist politics seeks to preserve the gains of late capitalism while going further than its value system, governance structures, and mass pathologies will allow."

Technology is thus embraced but the manifesto is careful to distance itself from 'techno-utopianism'. It is not given inherent qualitative judgements but considered in relation to a socio-political dialectic. Technology is a tool to be used in aiding radical communication and accelerating towards a post-capitalist society. It can also be a source of exhilaration, but one always influenced by socio-political factors shaping it. It is thus, as Robert McChesney's research demonstrates, not to be valorized in itself.

While accelerationism is the subject of warranted criticism for possible political complicity with neoliberalism and a problematically macho tone, accelerationist writing is also criticised (http://blog.voyou.org/2013/07/20/communism-equals-soviet-power-plus-amazon-com/) for self-conscious seriousness . The tone of seriousness, however, actually carries a compelling implicit argument: in an era saturated by nostalgia and regressive whimsicality in culture and politics, and a dearth of ambition, we would do well to approach collective experience with a

sense of seriousness. Accelerationist theory carries the implicit demand that we raise the standards of what passes for culture, and reinvest cultural production with a sense of authority (as well as cultural criticism for that matter), while explicitly arguing for a maximal politics of collective self-mastery, that issues a necessary challenge to the limitations of micro-political 'direct action'.

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